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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KWMN PREL AL
SUBJECT: POST VISITS NOTORIOUS BURREL PRISON AND NEWER KORCA
PRISON

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Poloffs traveled to two high-security, remote prisons in Burrel and Korca recently and had unfettered access to prison grounds and to the prisoners themselves. Overall, prison conditions appear to have improved significantly in recent years. The Directorate of Prisons has made a substantial commitment to improving treatment and conditions of prisoners and conforming Albania's detention facilities to European Union standards. End summary.

¶12. (SBU) Following the release of the 2008 Human Rights Report for Albania, Director General of Prisons Gazmend Dibra invited Post to review current prison conditions. Dibra said that the GOA has made considerable progress in prison management and conditions. In July, Poloffs chose to visit the notorious Burrel prison, two hours north of Tirana, which was constructed in the 1930s during the period of King Zog and used extensively under the communist regime as a maximum security prison. Poloffs also visited a new prison in Korca, built in the last two years, which, according to Dibra, is demonstrative of the direction the Albanian prison system is heading. The Korca facility was designed and funded by the European Union.

BURREL PRISON

¶13. (SBU) The very name of Burrel prison evokes powerful and chilling connotations in Albania. Used extensively throughout the communist period for the most "dangerous criminals," it retains sinister cultural associations. The relatively small, single story facility is located two hours north of Tirana outside the city of Burrel. When Post visited, 182 inmates were incarcerated (with a maximum capacity of 190 inmates). A staff of 120 corrections officers keeps watch and cares for the inmates. Burrel prison is old and Dibra speculated to Poloffs that he would close Burrel prison in about a year and a half.

¶14. (SBU) The very basic concrete prison is divided into three areas. Each rectangular area, about one acre in size, consists of living quarters at one end, an open yard in the middle and a shower/washing area at the other end. Prisoners are confined to their cells for 21 hours a day, and are allowed a three hour exercise/fresh air period in the yard. During their exercise period, prisoners may purchase sundries and confections at the prison canteen located in the yard. During Post's visit, Poloffs saw several inmates milling around the yard. Dibra said that during the hot summer months, inmates are able to move about for most of the day, in contrast to the general schedule where they are only allowed three hours a day outside. There is no specific dining facility, so prisoners eat meals in their cells. Poloffs entered one of the containment areas and spoke with several inmates who had been convicted of murder. The prisoners were friendly and curious to meet Embassy officials. All of them seemed to recognize Dibra, and thanked him and Poloffs for improvements in their conditions. As it was a hot day on the visit

and Burrel has no air conditioning, one of the prisoners inquired about when the GOA would install air conditioning. Dibra demurred. (Note: Most residences and public buildings in Albania lack air conditioning, which is considered by most people to be an expensive luxury. End Note).

¶15. (SBU) In the yard, Poloffs posed several questions directly to the inmates including questions relating to physical abuse. The inmates, who looked well fed and showed no signs of abuse, replied that they were not in fear of physical abuse. (Note: Poloffs observed a pay phone in the yard with a toll free number to the ombudsman posted next to it. End note.) The inmates described the regulations for family visits, phone privileges, religious observances and access to attorneys. Interestingly, Dibra said that the GOA houses inmates, to the extent that it is possible, according to the region that they are from to promote family visits. During the visits to both prisons, Poloffs noticed numerous visitors.

¶16. (SBU) Though Poloffs did not have direct access to the cells at Burrel prison; they did observe cells through the closed circuit security monitors. (Note: Prison officials indicated that the cells remain open in the summer months from 0700 to 1900 for the purposes of ventilation. End note.) In addition, each cell has a television with satellite access and a refrigerator where inmates may keep food stuffs purchased at the prison canteen. Educational opportunities at Burrel prison were minimal. Burrel prison did have a medical and dental clinic that was staffed twenty hours hours a day by a paramedic. Patients requiring significant medical attention are referred to a local hospital.

KORCA PRISON

¶17. (SBU) Korca prison is located in eastern Albania near the border of Macedonia. It is a new facility, and was built with EU funds and to EU specifications. Korca prison serves as a maximum and medium security facility. There are separate juvenile pre-trial detention facilities. The maximum capacity of the prison is 350 inmates, with a staff of 285. The director was himself imprisoned in Burrel for several years during communist times for "political" crimes. The prison has a modern medical and dental clinic which is staffed around the clock and which inmates may access by request given 24 hours notice, or immediately if an emergency arises. As with Burrel prison, more serious cases are treated at the local hospital. The facility has a separate room that serves as an interfaith chapel.

¶18. (SBU) Most of the uniformed prison staff at Korca prison were hired within the past year, and were still on probationary status. Each corrections officer receives 45 days of formal training, and then remains on probationary status until he completes one year of employment. In general, the corrections officers at Korca appeared to be young and professionally trained. As with Burrel prison, each inmate receives a three hour exercise/fresh air period in the yard. Inmates are entitled to two phone calls per week, and this privilege is respected, according to both inmates and prison staff with whom poloffs spoke. Family members are permitted to visit four times a month. Poloffs viewed private rooms where conjugal visits occur. Attorney visits were in general unrestricted. According to Dibra, emphasis is put on education, and Poloffs observed two young female teachers walking through the prison unescorted to class.

¶19. (SBU) During Poloffs' tour of the premises, one burly prisoner yelled repeatedly through the bars of his cell to Director Dibra. The prisoner complained that the guards had revoked several of his privileges for infractions and he thought the punishment unjust. He was candid in his criticisms, but at the same time was friendly and offered Poloffs cigarettes and water through his cell bars. He did not appear to exhibit any fear that his loud complaining to the Director would cause any ill treatment later. During the exchange, Poloffs observed the prisoner's cell, which housed four maximum security prisoners and had a television with satellite service, and a refrigerator. The door and outside window were opened to allow for the circulation of fresh air.

¶10. (SBU) Poloffs physically inspected the solitary confinement area and spoke at length with three prisoners detained in the disciplinary cells. An inmate who is under disciplinary

restrictions is housed alone in a separate unit. These inmates still receive three hours of exercise and fresh air, but do so alone, and in a smaller exercise yard. Each solitary cell has a toilet and sink, and appeared to be sanitary. The inmate's mattress is removed during the day to increase the austerity of the cell. At the time of Poloffs' inspection of the disciplinary unit, there appeared to be about four cells occupied out of a total of an estimated ten cells. Poloffs estimate that an inmate will spend two to three weeks in the disciplinary unit, depending on the nature of the infraction. Inmates housed in the unit have restricted phone, family visits and religious observance privileges.

OMBUDSMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

¶11. (SBU) In a separate meeting later with Artur Lazebu of the Ombudsman's office in Tirana, Lazebu said that his office cooperates very closely with Dibra. He too noted an overall positive trend for Albania's prison system, but said that corruption remains a serious problem. For example, he said sometimes prisoners are able to bribe their way out of prison for a few days of freedom. Lazebu said that his office has received no complaints from Burrel prison this year and approximately 20 from Korca. The complaints concerned everything from food to fighting.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The visits to these two prisons were brief, planned a week in advance, and under the direct escort of the prison director. Nonetheless, Poloffs did not have the impression that conditions were staged or choreographed. Poloffs had broad access to prisoners and facilities and were limited in their tour of the facilities mostly by security regulations. Conversations with numerous prisoners and staff were impromptu. The prison system appears to have made marked progress overall, at least at the Korca and Burrel prisons, and Director Dibra seems dedicated and knowledgeable. Most of the inmates appeared to know him, and the atmosphere at the two facilities was calm, without palpable tension and major discontent.

¶13. (SBU) The Korca prison has been built to EU standards and perhaps is the model for future facilities. Post believes Albania has made a substantial and long-term commitment to incorporating EU standards in both the quality of its detention facilities, and in its treatment of prisoners. Burrel prison, considered the worst in the country, is outdated and will close in the coming years. Funding is a major factor in improving prison conditions and building new facilities, but with the GOA's other pressing problems, it is difficult to see how funding for prisons will take priority. Despite the challenges, significant improvements to the prison systems are continuing to be made.

WITHERS